

Indochina

13 March 1979

A. China/Vietnam

1. Chinese attack into Vietnam which began 17 February culminated with fall of Lang Son on 2 March; on 5 March Chinese forces ordered to pull back into their own territory.

-- Attack was of major proportions; build-up involved element of as many as 10 armies totalling over 400,000 men, with 2 additional armies in reserve. Chinese air strength also built up to 600-700 aircraft

-- Perhaps 130,000 men actually took part in fighting inside Vietnam (approx. 12 divisions) with remainder just across border

-- Magnitude of Chinese effort evident from fact that until 24 December only forces Chinese had along VN border were numerically small local units.

-- We estimate Vietnamese initially had 40-50,000 men along border, but VN forces were augmented as fighting progressed.

2. Size and nature of Chinese build-up and political signals from Chinese sources on need to "punish" Vietnam convinced us beforehand that attack was likely, and we issued warning memorandum on 14 February.

3. Chinese had several objectives in mind:

-- As just noted, ostensible purpose was to "punish" VN for alleged "provocations" along Sino-VN border (incursions, armed attacks against people and property).

- However, more fundamental (but unstated) purpose was to demonstrate to Vietnamese that China would not permit them to intrude with impunity into areas of SEA of vital concern to China, e.g., Kampuchea. In wake of VN invasion of Kampuchea, China wanted to show it was not a "paper tiger".
- China's offensive also intended to show USSR that it cannot get away with using Vietnamese as Soviet surrogates in SEA in way that Cubans have been employed in Africa and Middle East.
- Some Chinese sources said, too, in a wider context China wanted to make point to the US that the way to respond to Soviet "hegemonism" and activities of Soviet-backed Cubans is not to be passive but to react with force.
- At same time, Chinese did not desire a prolonged conflict. At beginning of attack they said fighting was to be limited both in extent and duration, and that Chinese forces would be withdrawn since Vietnam had been taught a lesson.
 - ° We foresaw Chinese goals might indeed be limited and speculated in 14 Feb warning memo that fighting might not last beyond several weeks, and would not extend to attacks on Hanoi.

- ° Chinese clearly were considering international opinion - with Vietnam widely blamed for invading and occupying Kampuchea, they did not wish to be put in same position.
- ° They also wished to keep scale of hostilities below threshold which would compel Soviets to intervene in support of Vietnam.

4. Invasion began at dawn on 17th and Chinese attacked virtually every town, village, and military position along entire 1300 km frontier.

- Most assaults by battalions or regiments.
- One or more divisions attacked at Lao Cai, Cao Bang, Dong Dang, Mong Cai.
- Tanks and artillery provided fire support to infantry.
- Chinese began by seizing a narrow 5 to 10 km strip, but expanded this once VN border defenses overcome.
- Deepest incursions in Lao Cai, Cao Bang, and Dong Dang-- Lang Son areas.
 - As much as 25 kilometers deep from Lao Cai
 - At least 25 kilometers in Lang Son area
 - Up to 50 kilometers deep in Cao Bang sector

5. Initial major Chinese military objective was destruction of Vietnamese provincial forces defending border region.

-- Seven or 8 such divisions, 40-50,000 men, were posted to defend Lao Cai, Cao Bang, Long Dang-Lang Son, and Mong Cai.

6. Second major objective was to inflict significant casualties. Units defending Hanoi were initially not committed, but later some elements were sent into combat.
7. Third major objective was to ease pressure on Kampuchean resistance by forcing Hanoi to recall some combat forces from that region.

-- This purpose also accomplished to some extent.
8. Lang Son became major set-piece battle following Chinese capture of Dong Dang.

-- VN moved infantry, tanks, APC's, artillery northwards; partly from main force units near Hanoi, but, also from elsewhere in Vietnam, Laos, Kampuchea.

-- VN sent considerable number of aircraft north (F-5's, MIG-19s, A-37s, C-130 cargo aircraft, helicopter gunships and transports.) However, air power not used by either side except for reconnaissance.

-- Vietnamese main forces alerted throughout Vietnam and nation-wide mobilization order issued.

-- Accordingly, Chinese capture of Lang Son and defeat of VN main force units was, in fact, a significant victory even if in scale it was less than Chinese had hoped.

-- Once this accomplished Chinese announced withdrawal to their side of "historically recognized border" would commence as of 5 March.

9. Chinese withdrawal underway, with only sporadic interference by Vietnamese.

-- Chinese concentrating just across VN border, notably N of Dong Dang, and could attack again at any time.

-- They could also counterattack if Vietnamese significantly attempt interfere with Chinese pull-back.

10. Both sides claimed victory following Chinese withdrawal announcement, but circumstances of fighting and subsequent developments indicate that Chinese probably came out on top.

-- At least 2 VN main force divisions together with other main force elements and provincial units chewed up by Chinese, who claim 15-17,000 VN soldiers killed and 1000-1500 captured. (Chinese losses were also substantial, but Chinese armed forces far outnumber Vietnamese, and can better afford such losses.)

-- VN Ambassador in France told newspaper reporter that "Vietnam has suffered losses that were "quite important in terms of military and civilian losses as well as in terms of material."

-- Despite Chinese withdrawal announcement, VN continued nation-wide mobilization and began to shift additional forces to Chinese border from Laos and from deep in

Kampuchea. As many as 30,000 troops moved from Kampuchea; 2 divisions from Laos.

- ° Removal of troops from Kampuchea (which continues despite Chinese withdrawal) should considerably improve prospects of Kampuchean resistance.
- ° Draw-down of VN forces in Laos has created concern in Hanoi (and among Soviets as well) that China may now attempt to support anti-government elements in Laos.
- Contrary to situation prior to VN invasion of Kampuchea, Vietnamese now must be prepared for Chinese attack at any time, and must maintain large numbers of main force troops along Sino-VN border against this contingency.
- In sum, Vietnam now stretched thin militarily, aware that it cannot afford to ignore threat of Chinese attack in any further moves it makes in SEA despite Friendship and Cooperation Treaty with the Soviets, and confronted with heightened domestic economic and political difficulties.

11. Advantages not wholly to Chinese, however, since Soviet role in VN enhanced as a result of the fighting.

- VN now receiving additional quantities of Soviet military aid, including MIG-21s and SA-3s.

- Soviets may have gained access for their naval vessels to VN ports. Soviet naval ships are now at Danang, and have called at Ho Chi Minh City and Haiphong. No such visits occurred prior to Chinese attack. Soviet transport aircraft also providing VN with internal airlift.
- In event of renewed fighting, Soviets may feel compelled to react more forcefully than in this instance.
- Vietnamese will nevertheless probably try to keep Soviet role from becoming too great, e.g., by holding back on granting full base rights for Soviet air and naval units.

B. Kampucheans continue stiff resistance in countryside

1. Fighting throughout the country, particularly in the SW.
2. VN re-supply effort hampered -- roads trenched, bridges destroyed.
3. Quick VN thrust took major towns and roads but did not destroy Kampuchean forces. Pol Pot believed operating near Battambang.
4. Sixteen of 31 VN combat divisions initially tied down.
 - VN involvement may have reached to as many as 19 divisions.
 - However, Hanoi now withdrawing equipment (artillery, commo gear, anti-tank weapons) supplies, and main force units (infantry, engineers).

- Difficulties thereby increased for VN forces remaining in Kampuchea.
- Kampuchean forces may even be regrouping into division-size combat units.
- 5. Chinese apparently managing to get supplies to Kampucheans via Thailand. Kampucheans also appear to have cached ample supplies of food, weapons, and ammunition.
- 6. If Kampuchean resistance can hold out until rainy season arrives in May-June, odds favoring Vietnamese will be considerably reduced and prospects improved for establishment of viable anti-VN political structure.
 - However, Pol Pot regime resented by Kampuchean people, who apparently support him either because they hate the Vietnamese more or because they fear reprisals if they cooperate with VN.
- 7. Sihanouk in Peking, where Chinese may use him to head a new "coalition government" more acceptable to Kampuchean and world opinion than Pol Pot.
 - Problem for Chinese is that Sihanouk refusing to work with Pol Pot.

C. Soviet Role

1. Soviets watched with concern:

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2. Ten or more Soviet naval vessels moved to South China Sea: 3 surface warships including command/control cruiser, one alligator-class amphibious landing ship, 2 AGI's, 2 survey ships, 2 oilers.

-- Two nuclear submarines, E-class attack type and E-II class cruise missile type, also operating in South China Sea.

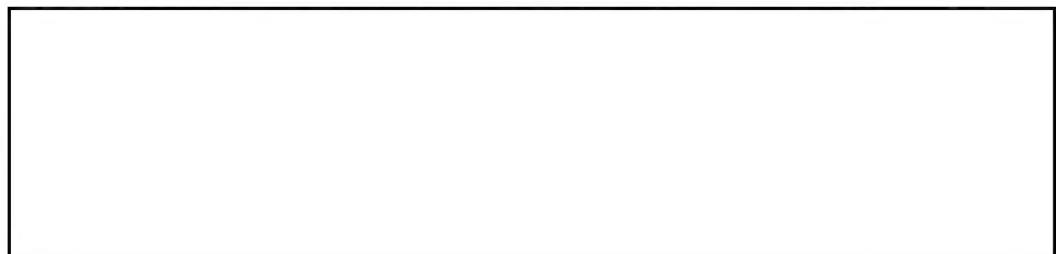
3. Soviet officials warned in non-specific terms of possible Soviet retaliation if Chinese went "too far."

-- However, Moscow careful not to commit itself in advance to any course of action.

-- Recent speeches by senior Soviet leaders including Brezhnev have not gone beyond demanding that Chinese withdraw from VN; Brezhnev suggested that early conclusion of SALT agreement with US outweighed considerations favoring Soviet intervention -- at least under present circumstances.

- Soviets now congratulating themselves for their "statesmanship" in not being sucked into direct involvement by the Chinese.
- No military augmentations on Sino/Soviet border,

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4. Soviet Options

- Consultations (under November 78 Treaty). Chief of Soviet Foreign Ministry SEA Division visited Hanoi recently to discuss "problems of common concern".
- Conspicuous military aid, possibly including "volunteer" fighter pilots.
 - Soviet cargo aircraft carrying military supplies now flying regularly to Hanoi -- at least 12 such flights.
- Naval show of force in Vietnam area; presence at Haiphong, Cam Ranh Bay, or Danang.
 - Five or six ships called at Danang in week beginning 4 March. Possible Haiphong also port of call. (Naval vessels never visited Vietnam before.)

[Redacted]

-- Military pressure against or across Soviet border with China.

5. Chinese feared air attack in NW China

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6. Balance in North favors Soviets who could move with little or no warning.

-- Soviets - 44 divisions (500,000 men).

-- Chinese - 98 divisions (1,700,000 men).

-- Soviets - 12,000 tanks.

-- Chinese - 4,500 tanks.

-- Soviets - 2,250 aircraft.

-- Chinese - 2,700 aircraft, but less capable.

7. Soviet reaction related nature and severity of Chinese move against VN.

-- Clearly wished to avoid protracted ground engagement in China.

-- However, Chinese saw some risk of Soviet attack, sent some reinforcements north and moved back civilian population in NE as well as NW. Chinese probably watching unusual Soviet local movements adjacent to NE China very closely.

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E. As a result, the Chinese may feel compelled to "punish" Hanoi and to demonstrate that their failure to protect Pol Pot does not translate into impotence elsewhere. This could come in the form of a sharp military confrontation along the Sino-Vietnamese border.

VI. Chinese concern about possible Soviet countermeasures must be factored into any Chinese decision on ~~when~~ ~~how far to go~~ and ~~how~~ to "punish" the Vietnamese.

A. We would expect the Soviets' initial reaction to increased Chinese military pressure on Vietnam to include demonstrations of support in the Indochina theater; for instance, an airlift of military supplies, a visit by a Soviet naval contingent, or well-publicized consultations.

B. The Soviets might later begin a campaign of intimidation along the Sino-Soviet border-- including demonstrative military air and ground patrolling, military maneuvers and, ultimately, some sort of limited military provocation.

VII. The high military and political costs and risks of a major military attack against China, as well as uncertain benefits, make such an attack highly improbable.

A. A large-scale conventional campaign would require a huge expenditure of forces and could promise neither conclusive military results nor political payoffs.

B. A nuclear attack on China would have a greater potential for conclusive results, but it would carry incalculable risks--Chinese nuclear retaliation and a radical destabilization of the global strategic environment.

VIII. We have seen no militarily significant changes in the force posture of either side along the Sino-Soviet border since the invasion of Kampuchea. Gradual force improvements, however, continue.

A. The Soviets currently have some 500,000 troops in the border region.

1. Most of their 43⁴ divisions are under-strength, but by calling up reservists, divisions closest to population centers could be brought up to combat strength in a few days.

2. The Soviet divisions are mostly motorized rifle divisions and have over 120,000 tanks,

B. The Chinese have 1.7 million troops along the Soviet border, and outnumber Soviet forces by more than three-to-one, but Soviet units have substantial advantages in firepower and mobility.

1. Most of China's 98 divisions are infantry. Virtually all of them are fully manned and equipped; most are located well back from the border.

2. China's forces are best prepared to fight a nonnuclear defensive war; China would probably use nuclear armed missiles only in retaliation because of the overwhelming Soviet advantage in tactical nuclear weapons.

C. The Soviets probably could achieve local air superiority. They have far superior and better armed aircraft and the most effective array of air defense weapons in the world.

D. While Soviet nuclear superiority over China has increased since 1969, so has China's retaliatory capability. China has about 70 strategic missiles capable of reaching Soviet targets. Most are stored in caves or remote

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